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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Robert Spangler age 48, Princeton, Iowa
Meredith Ferguson
Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School, Vinton, Iowa
5-16-2011**

Meredith Ferguson: This is Meredith Ferguson and I am interviewing Robert, is it Spangler?

Robert Spangler: Spangler.

Ferguson: The date is May 16, 2011. The interview is taking place at the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School in Vinton, Iowa. I believe it's just before 12 o'clock. The purpose of this interview is that it's going to become part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Robert, do I have your consent to record this interview?

Spangler: You sure do, yes.

Ferguson: Thank you very much. Before we start, could you give me your full name and your age?

Spangler: Robert Allen Spangler. I'm 48.

Ferguson: And, where were you born?

Spangler: Avon, Illinois.

Ferguson: Oh, so you're from out of state?

Spangler: No, that's where I was born. I came to Iowa when I was one, or less than one.

Ferguson: Okay. Where did you grow up?

Spangler: Princeton, Iowa.

Ferguson: Princeton, Iowa. And, did you attend school here in Vinton?

Spangler: I did.

Ferguson: When did you start?

Spangler: Fourth grade. Yep, 1972-73 school year kind of mid-way through the year.

Ferguson: And, did you go through high school?

Spangler: Yep.

Ferguson: So, I'm assuming you went through grade school or public school?

Spangler: I went to public school 'till fourth grade.

Ferguson: Fourth grade, okay. Before I get more into that, what is the cause of your blindness?

Spangler: Albinism.

Ferguson: Albinism?

Spangler: Yeah.

Ferguson: Okay. And, you have some sight?

Spangler: Yep.

Ferguson: Right now. Has it changed over the years or has it remained constant?

Spangler: It's pretty steady, constant, yep.

Ferguson: Could you maybe explain how well you can see?

Spangler: That's a hard one to do.

Ferguson: Is it?

Spangler: Yeah, because everybody has their own description of it. I don't know how to explain it. I mean, I can see fairly well. It's less than 20/200.

Ferguson: I guess I was just curious. Do you have...does, like, night and day make a difference in how well you can see; anything like that?

Spangler: No.

Ferguson: Is there anything that's really, when it becomes blurry to you?

Spangler: Nothing really gets blurry, no. It's just I can't see distances. I mean, I can see; the finer points don't come out. It's just like, if there was somebody standing at the end of the driveway I wouldn't be able to see them. I mean, I can see the end of the driveway, but I couldn't make out who they were or anything.

Ferguson: Sure. So, what brought you to the Braille School in fourth grade?

Spangler: Services were better here.

Ferguson: Okay.

Spangler: Just, my parents thought it was the best thing to do.

Ferguson: Were they contacted do you know, or did they just kind of do some searching and found out?

Spangler: I think they did some searching to find out what was best. There was some discussion to keep me in public school, but I wasn't doing very good there.

Ferguson: You said the services were better. So, kind of, could you maybe give a general idea of the type of services?

Spangler: Well, in public school everything, when classes...What large print books I did have were few and far between, at the time. A lot of the stuff was, the teacher would read the information to us, to me, I should say. And, a lot of it just drew attention to I was different. And, other kids, although they say they don't pick on you, they do. (Laughter) At the time they had the magnifiers that clamped to the desk, or built on the desks. And, that just, that drew attention; really made a big difference you know, technology at the time. That made a big difference in how the kids seen that you were blind or visually impaired; you were different. So, you started getting picked on. I think my parents also seen that I wasn't being included in a lot of the stuff that other kids were doing. Kids would play baseball; I couldn't do that. They wouldn't let me do it. (Laughter) Riding bicycles was different. I did that all the time. I mean, I had

two or three people that I rode with all the time, but it wasn't like the rest of the kids. They all rode in groups or did things. So, they, my parents, visited the school and seen what was here, what was offered, and they knew that was what they wanted for us, me and my brother.

Ferguson: So, your brother...

Spangler: Is the same, yeah, but he's two years younger.

Ferguson: But, the same kind of...from Albinism?

Spangler: Yeah.

Ferguson: Okay. And, did he come to the school, then, the same time you did?

Spangler: Same time.

Ferguson: Just two years younger?

Spangler: Yep, just two years younger.

Ferguson: Okay. So, you feel like you got a good education here?

Spangler: I got a very good education here. The education I got here was something I would not have gotten in public school, because anything I needed was right here, I mean, the books, the teachers. In public school the classes were small, but here the classes were small, the teachers cared. The teachers, well, they were visually impaired themselves,

most of them. Or they just knew how to work with the kids better. In high school they tried doing stuff, making us go to classes in the public school here. I had Biology class in the public school. I didn't learn anything compared to what the students here learned, because everything's pushed so fast in the class in public school, that there's just no way I could keep up with what was going on. I got so far behind that, basically, there's no way I could have caught up. My friends who went to school here they were learning so much more and talking about stuff that I knew nothing about, as far as what was going on in the class. They got to dissect the animals; I couldn't in school. I mean, we had aids or assistants who would come and help. They would do the actual stuff and show you what was there. But here, they got to do it themselves, so they actually got the feel and seeing what was going on.

Ferguson: That makes a difference.

Spangler: So, this school really made me what I am. I had to. It was just a lot more experiences I got here. The sports' was a big deal because I got to get involved in swimming and track. Unfortunately, I didn't get to do wrestling because I got injured in track. (Laughter)

Ferguson: What did you run?

Spangler: I don't even remember all the stuff that we had. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Oh that's okay. I was just curious.

Spangler: I know I did the high jump and did the mile run, but also, here, when we had tandem running; which since I was a partial, we ran with a blind student who got to run in the mile. I did both of those, but rather than me setting the pace, I had to let the blind person set the pace, which the way I understand it today they don't do it that way.

Ferguson: Interesting!

Spangler: It is. But sports' was a big thing. And, I got to swim the 500, and the experiences, since we...Those of us, here, got to go out and compete against students with the same disabilities, so we were on an even ground as far as competition. We didn't have students who were fully sighted; who didn't have to worry about is there something in the track in front of me. They could run full out, you know, where the blind person or visually impaired, they're always wondering, you know, is there something I'm going to hit? So, they don't; it's just always in your mind. You don't always, you don't think so, but it is there. It's there; a fear of whatever, I guess. And, plus disabilities, you know. There are other issues that come up with them as far as, maybe you don't have the ability to run as fast. So, at least working with these other schools you got, competed against the same type of stuff.

Ferguson: Yeah, sure.

Spangler: Made a big difference; traveling to Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota; all around the Mid-West. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had that opportunity. Our team, we had goal ball, which is a ball; I don't know if you know what that is.

Ferguson: No I don't. (Laughter)

Spangler: It's a, I forget how big the ball is, three or six pounds. It's got a bell in it, and you have three people on each end of the court, and you try to throw the ball to get past them. Our team, the Iowa team, went to Seattle, Washington for a competition out there with track, field, swimming, and wrestling. And, that was one of the sports that was done. We took second in the nation, because we played till like 3:30 in the morning against the team from Illinois. Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

Ferguson: Were there, I guess, any other classes or skills that you learned while you were here that really made a difference for you?

Spangler: I think all the classes here helped because, like I said earlier, a lot of the visually impaired teachers; we had several blind teachers who were physically disabled, you know, in wheel chairs. And, seeing them being able to do and overcome their disability kind of gives you the incentive to; I can do that, or I can be more than what I am told I can be. You know, you always have people telling you that you won't be able to do that. You won't be able to go to school or go to get into business, or whatever. But, if you put your mind to it, you can do it. And, that shows, too, that you can do it. So, I think all the classes here helped.

Ferguson: Good. What did you do after you graduated from here?

Spangler: After I graduated, I went to work for my Uncle who did construction; did all kinds of stuff. (Laughter) So, I learned a lot of things tuck pointing. He just did all kinds of odd jobs, and I helped him out with that until he passed away. And, I kind of did some stuff on my own. Some of the stuff I learned from him, electrical stuff.

And, it was '94 I moved to Vinton, here. I got involved in community activities. I got involved with Emergency Management, helping with their disaster drills. Now, I work part time there for them and have had a lot of training through FEMA for a lot of stuff that I don't think I would have had the opportunity to do.

Computers were a big thing after. Of course, going to school they didn't have computers back in the Stone Age. (Laughter) No, I'm just kidding. Computers were just coming out when I was leaving. I did do some of the conversion of some of the programs to voice. So, there's some of the games while I was here, like the seniors; I helped one of the teachers convert a lot of games that weren't in voice to voice. So, I got some introduction to computer programming. Now, I do web design; I design web pages. I do a lot of graphic stuff.

Ferguson: Okay. Do you do that along with the part time?

Spangler: Aha.

Ferguson: Okay.

Spangler: I do a lot of different things. I've been, I got involved with community stuff. I was a board member for the Historical Society on their Board of Directors. Was

Secretary, President; I've been most all the officers in history groups.

15:00

Spangler: Currently, I'm a Commissioner on the Historic Preservation Commission for Benton County.

Ferguson: Very cool!

Spangler: I'm President of the Alumni Association for the Braille School.

Ferguson: Can you talk a little bit about that, the Alumni Association?

Spangler: The group wanted to do something to organize, so we could keep in contact, trying to do what we can, finding people. So, we decided we'd start an organization in 2005. We kind of all came together and agreed to start the organization. Officers hold positions for two years, then they're either re-elected, or new people are elected to the position. But, we can only hold the position consecutively three terms, so this is my last term for that. It's been a big help in getting things going. We got annual alumni reunions. We're hoping to continue them; beginning the planning for the 150th anniversary of the school being located in Vinton; will be the school's 160th birthday next year.

Ferguson: Oh wow!

Spangler: Yeah, 2012 will be a big year. But, we do fund raisers to try to help out. What we hope to do, is to establish funds to help either get people to the school for reunions, or be able to help them maybe with some funds for equipment or something. It's different when you're not into education. You can't get the modern technologies, and they're just so expensive, so somebody might need help; maybe we can help somehow, we don't know. We're just thoughts right now. Maybe we can find a good fund raising effort to do. I think, currently, we got 40 members. We're hoping to get that a lot more. We send out mailings to, like 250 to 300 people who we keep in contact with. So, it's growing slow as everything does. Everything grows slow, which is good. You don't want to grow it too fast and have all the major troubles. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Exactly. So, you've been involved from the very beginning?

Spangler: Yes.

Ferguson: And, you're President Right?

Spangler: Yep.

Ferguson: So, you've been President since the beginning?

Spangler: I've been President since the beginning, yeah.

Ferguson: Okay. Are there any other major players involved with that? I guess, like your original group, when you got

together. Who decided that this was something that you wanted to pursue?

Spangler: It was pretty good sized. Dennis Thurman, who was Superintendent at the time, encouraged us to do it. We had Carl Owens, who was a big supporter; Gary Van Doren. People look up to both of those guys, especially Carl. He's one that, he does a lot of good things. A lot of people don't see it that way, but he does. He started out, inspired me with HAM Radio early, so I always look up to him for everything, and a lot of others do, too. Jim Sogling, he's another one that got us, got involved with us early. The group of those...We had Carol Cruise, I was trying to think of her name. Carol Cruise, who was a Counselor here at the school for many years, is a big supporter of us, too. And, she's been on our board since the beginning.

Ferguson: You mentioned HAM radio. Are you currently a HAM Radio operator?

Spangler: Yes, I am.

Ferguson: Can you kind of, can you explain HAM radio a little bit? You don't have to go too in-depth, but just kind of a nice overview for somebody listening.

Spangler: Yeah. Well, and it's kind of a dying thing but yet it isn't. (Laughter) It's radio. We communicate with people around the world. Not so much Morse Code anymore, the dots and dashes, but there are a lot of us who still know it and still; I don't practice it very often, but it's not like your current, like you pick up your cell phone and you call

somebody. This you get on, pick up a microphone and you call and you might get somebody around the world in Germany. I just talked to somebody in Germany a few weeks ago. That was really the first time I've ever done that. But, you hear people talking about the band, about communications issues. TV is having troubles. They're going to narrow banding and everything. HAM radio isn't like that. You, we got so many frequencies or bands they call it. We got 160 meters, which is two megahertz wide. I don't know how to explain that other than it's a big band area. We got 80 meters, 75 meters, which is the same thing. If I had to break it down into channels, there's probably a thousand channels, if you want to channelize it. 40 meters is about the same way. I guess, it's just there's so much communications that you can do there, and they do digital communications. It's a lot of fun and it's a good thing for people to get involved in it, because you get to communicate with people around the world that you wouldn't get a chance to. It is a lot of fun.

Ferguson: And, how did you get involved with that again?

Spangler: I got introduced to it through Carl Owens, who was a student here. He helped run the HAM Radio station when they had one here. And, then some of the local people here in town also kind of inspired me to do it, to go on with it.

Ferguson: I think Jeff Young mentioned that he does HAM Radio, too.

Spangler: Aha.

Ferguson: Is it pretty, are there quite a few people here in town that do that?

Spangler: There are. I think, within Vinton itself here, there's like 16 of us or so, yeah.

Ferguson: Oh wow, that's a good number.

Spangler: Throughout the county, I think there's like 80 or 85. Vinton has got the biggest group in one area, so it makes it nice. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Kind of wanted to talk about your involvement with organizations for the blind. And, I know you're President of ICUB?

Spangler: Iowa Council of the United Blind, yep.

Ferguson: Okay, could you maybe talk about the philosophy of ICUB? Just, you don't have to go too in-depth, but give a nice overview of what you do and what you stand for. You think you could do that? (Laughter)

Spangler: Well, see, prior to 2007 I wasn't involved in any of the organizations for the blind. I was asked to go to, if I'd be interested in going to Washington D.C. for the President's meeting and talking with legislators or congressmen out there to see what it was like. And, I met a lot of great people. So, when I came back I wanted to do something. Well, jokingly somebody says, "Well, we didn't find anybody to run for President." So, next thing I know here I am, but

we do a lot of good things. The Cross Walk signage, making the cross walks safe, audible signals where they're feasible to do. The quiet car issue is a big thing, you know. We want to make sure that these cars have some sort of noise, because it's pretty dangerous. If you can't hear something coming and you don't see, you don't hear, and you're going to cross the street you're going to get hit. There's just so much to try to make people independent, I guess, is what we try to do. And, not be afraid of getting out and getting places; making sure that there's job opportunities. The currency issue is another thing that I don't know if I support it so much. But, it's a big thing that the organization does; or accessible money. Myself, I like the idea of, if the government wants to make it accessible, give them the new identifiers. And, that would be a lot cheaper than changing all the money. (Laughter) I guess, our organization locally just isn't as much as I'd like it to be. I'd like to see us get more people involved and do more; get the word out there about what we are and who we are, and get it so we understand ourselves what we are. (Laughter)

Ferguson: How big is your local organization?

Spangler: I think we have here in Iowa, we have about 100 to 115, which is dropping, I mean. And, part of that is I would like to see our organization travel across the state with our annual conferences. Right now we just hold them in one location, which is usually Des Moines. I'd like to see it go across the state; each year be in a different location to get the word out, so more people can come and get involved. I like getting people involved. I don't like the same people doing the same thing over, and over, and over

again, you know. You got to get new blood in there and new ideas new things going.

Ferguson: Sure. So, I guess trying to compare organizations, or give the listeners...We always kind of want to explain as best we can, because not everybody understands ICUB versus the NFB, is the big one that I can think of; like in terms of philosophy and kinds of activities that you do. Could you maybe point out a couple differences, or any other organization that you can think of?

Spangler: See, here in Iowa it is a big NFB/ICUB deal and I'm not sure about it, because I wasn't around what the issues are. I know they don't like you to be members of both, which to me is kind of odd, because if I were wanting to be involved, I'd like to be involved in both. To be...Philosophies are just, I don't know how to explain, but I'm going to go down here. So many philosophies are the same, but they're presented different; but yet they are different. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Is it how...I get it, that a lot of philosophies are the same, like at the root of it. So, it's just a matter of how they're acted out?

Spangler: How they act out, right. I guess, I would better understand it, if I would know more about the NFB and how they are. I mean, I just got to go on what history is and I'm sure history's good. But, you know, it's good to learn things first-hand, and that's the type of person I am. I want to learn first-hand what things are, how things go.

One thing I do know about the NFB is the whole...I don't look up to one single person, and I don't agree with that

philosophy to support, put one person on a pedestal. I keep hearing about Kenneth Jernigan being such a great guy. You know, I had the chance to meet the guy. I don't agree with him being a great guy as such. I mean, as an individual, yeah he's a great guy. But, I'm not one to be put on a pedestal and pushed, you know. I guess, that's a philosophy I don't agree with at all. It's more about the people, not a person. I guess that's where I want to go. (Laughter) We all have our ways of doing things. We all have our ideas, and we should look at them all. We shouldn't continue to focus on, this is how he wants it done, or she wants it done, or...We need to work together, what's best overall. That's what I'd like to see.

Ferguson: So, are you involved with any other organizations for the blind?

Spangler: No.

Ferguson: Just ICUB?

Spangler: Just ICUB, yep. I've offered to join the other group, but I've been told I can't do that. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Are there any other groups that you've heard of?

30:00

Spangler: No, I just know of the two.

Ferguson: Just the two?

Spangler: ICUB and NFB.

Ferguson: Are there any other sorts of, I guess, community involvements, any other activities, organizations in general that you do?

Spangler: No, not that I can think of. I mean, right now its Emergency Management's the part-time thing. I work part-time at Coots Materials Company, which is a quarry company. Currently, I'm not a member of the Historical Society, just a member of the county organized Historic Preservation Commission. That's basically all I am right now. I guess, I've been burned out over the past ten years doing a lot of stuff. It's time to sit back. (Laughter)

Ferguson: You certainly seem super involved. (Laughter)

Spangler: I think I've just reached that point where it's time to sit back and decide what I want to do. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Is there anything you, I guess, in the immediate future or further down the road, that you'd like to do, that you see yourself doing; maybe in terms of an organization or an activity, or something like that?

Spangler: I really don't know. I've done a lot up to this point. I think I just want to take time off, you know, and see what's out there; see what's different; see what I can do. I don't know what it would be right now. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Do you see yourself, maybe going out of the state, and kind of getting from the national perspective?

Spangler: You know, I've thought about that, going out and doing something, but I haven't found the, or haven't decided what path to go. I like doing things nationally where you can get involved in. I just haven't figured out how to do it yet, how I want to do it. But, I don't want something that's going to take over all my time, where I can't do stuff I want to do. You know, I've got three girls of my own, and a granddaughter, so I want time for myself, too. I don't want to overdo everything. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Sure. So, I guess looking at it in a progressive light, attitudes towards blindness just in general, because you mentioned going to public school. You had some pretty negative experiences, and then you had some pretty positive experiences here in Vinton. Have you had more negative or positive ones, looking back after school, and even now today?

Spangler: You know, this is sad to say blindness issues are, you don't see the community acceptance of the blind anymore. I don't see it as...Okay, like for instance. Here, years ago everybody made sure their sidewalks were clean during the winter. Everybody made sure their sidewalks were repaired. When work was being done, they made sure that things were fenced off, or blocked off. Now-days you don't see that at all. Everybody's put in the same type of, like, when you're walking, now-days they put up ribbon. They don't think about the blind having to use a cane. And, by the time they get there, they're into their construction zone or into things. And, I think a lot of it is because the awareness isn't there.

I said earlier I have three daughters. They went to the public schools. And, they are, just the treatment of the kids who are in public schools, who are blind or visually impaired, are getting...They don't like...They do their best to make friends with those kids, and to help them overcome the challenges, but it's just so overwhelming they don't know what to do. The teachers don't listen, unfortunately. Although when you do question it, "Yeah we're listening; we're talking." In reality they're not. I mean, I just don't think that...it may not be just the blind. It might be all disabilities, because class sizes now-days, especially with the economy, things; fewer teachers, more students. Class sizes are getting way out of hand, and activities that the kids are doing. As far as blindness goes, I don't think it's as...awareness isn't what it used to be. Why? I don't know.

Ferguson: Is that something that you're hoping to work on with your organization involvement?

Spangler: Yeah, that would be a good one. That would be...How do you go about it? That would be a good, you know, get out there that, you know, just because you walk down the sidewalk or you're driving your car and you see kids playing. Maybe that kid who's playing can't see and he's, you know, running after somebody, and he doesn't know that there's a road there. Or he knows there's a road there, but he doesn't really think it's this close. People just...we're so. I guess, now-days the attitude is somebody else is watching over me, and that's not the way it should be. We should be watching out for ourselves. So, maybe that's a good thing to be working on. Get the word out both ways for the blind and for the sighted people, you know.

Watch out for us; we'll watch out for you type of thing; a joint effort.

Ferguson: That's how it should be.

Spangler: That's right.

Ferguson: Well, I've run through my list of questions, so if there's...Is there anything else that you'd like to add, expand upon?

Spangler: I think we've hit everything I can think of.

Ferguson: Okay, good deal. And, thank you very much!

Spangler: You bet.

36:56

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

8-5-2011